

NICK AT NIGHT:
NOCTURNAL METAFICTIONS
IN THREE HEMINGWAY
SHORT STORIES

m a r g o t s e m p r e o r a

Webster University

in his biography of ernest hemingway, Kenneth Lynn suggests that Malcolm Cowley, Philip Young, and others have misread the Nick Adams of “Big Two-Hearted River,” that Nick’s anxious and obsessive behavior in that tale does not arise explicitly from his wartime injuries, but rather, originates in an earlier family trauma (Lynn 105). Writing about the Nick of “Now I Lay Me” and “A Way You’ll Never Be,” Carl Eby considers that the author has “confused the symptoms of shell shock” with those caused by a trauma prior to the war (195) and James Phelan links Nick’s war wounds with early “psychic trauma.”¹ Agreeing with these readings, I will consider as a possible source of the young soldier/fisherman’s anxiety two traumatic childhood incidents described by Nick in “Now I Lay Me,” a rare first-person narrative in which the soldier Nick explains the motivation that drives his compulsive verbal habits of composition: “I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body” (CSS 276). Using “Now I Lay Me” as a kind of subtext for two other related Nick Adams tales, both of which were begun in first person, then removed to third, we can better understand the nature and consequences of Nick’s fear.² In addition, the three stories, “Big Two-Hearted River,” “Now I Lay Me,” and “A Way You’ll Never Be,” have much to tell us about parallel habits of composition in Nick Adams and Ernest Hemingway.

The stories are linked in the chronology of Hemingway's writing life as well as in Nick's young manhood. Published between 1924 and 1933, they look at Nick during and just after the war. Drafts of the tales reveal that Hemingway worked on all three stories during the 1920s, returning to "A Way You'll Never Be" several times until its publication in 1933 (Smith, *Reader's Guide* 268–270, Scafella 184–185). These were brother stories, carried in Hemingway's imagination together, and composed during less than a decade. In the chronology of Nick's life, the stories reverse the order in which they were published: "A Way You'll Never Be," published last, in 1933, looks at the youngest Nick, a soldier recovering from a head wound who returns too early to the Italian front, while "Big Two-Hearted River" (1924), gives us the soldier back home, fishing a Michigan river. In the middle story, "Now I Lay Me" (1927), a postwar Nick remembers a summer night behind the front lines when he held off sleep to keep his soul from leaving his body.

"Now I Lay Me" is central to our understanding of Nick; its narrative voice constitutes a consciousness that embraces and comments upon the three periods of Nick's life, illuminating the internal territory of disturbing, early memories. Its double time frame arguably includes the life events of the other two stories, because the "now" when the narrative is created represents a future reflective moment, not only in the life of the young soldier who remembers back to when he lay himself down to keep awake, but also in the lives of the other two Nicks. In the remembered past, that night of prayer and invention, the Nick of "Now I Lay Me" produces an abundance of conscious verbal material in order to prevent himself from losing his soul; in the present, as he confides his memory to the reader, Nick may be reenacting the same verbal practice, for he is as yet only "fairly sure" that souls do not go off in the dark.

I myself did not want to go to sleep because I had been living for a long time with the knowledge that if I ever shut my eyes in the dark and let myself go, my soul would go out of my body. I had been that way for a long time, ever since I had been blown up at night and felt it go out of me and go off and then come back. I could only stop it by a very great effort. So while now I am fairly sure that it would not really have gone out, yet then, that summer, I was unwilling to make the experiment. (CSS 276)

What interests me about this story is, first, the nature of that “very great effort”; Nick’s self-rescue takes the form of a summoning of memory and invention. The candid first-person narrative of “Now I Lay Me” replicates a therapeutic talk session, in which the reader is given an intimate and consistent (if fragmented) portrait which is useful in reading Nick in the several contexts of these tales; Nick reveals the strategies he has devised for survival. Second, I am interested in the childhood trauma that necessitates Nick’s “very great effort”: in “Now I Lay Me,” Nick recalls two scenes that he witnessed as a boy, two separate occasions during which he watched his mother destroy his father’s belongings in small fires. While “ever since I had been blown up at night” seems the stated cause of the insomnia, it is interesting to note that that phrase was not included until the final version of the tale, while in all of the first three versions, Hemingway reworks Nick’s account of the fire.³ In addition, imagery linked to the fires of “Now I Lay Me” appears in the other two tales; together, the three stories have something to tell us about the source of Nick’s anxiety and its relationship to the fashioning of fiction.

Nick is described by Kenneth Lynn as Hemingway’s “stalking horse for exploring his anxieties” (Lynn 45). That is, by definition, “A horse or figure of a horse used by a hunter for stalking game.” Seeing Nick as a kind of stand-in psyche—an experimental, remembering, reacting consciousness for Hemingway—allows us to consider the metafictional relevance of Nick the writer to Hemingway the writer, and to observe the parallels in their motives, materials, and methods of telling tales. The portrayals of Nick Adams in these three stories point us to a man, at the center of whose work is not a war trauma, but a parental battle.

While “Now I Lay Me” is unique in its final, first-person, confessional form, the stories read like three versions of one dream, sharing many of the same physical elements, to which Nick maintains a consistent emotional response—night, fire, river, grasshoppers, trout, shards of objects, and fragments of printed material. Each story repeats the pattern of formed and broken surfaces, images rising to consciousness that break through the narrative, sometimes threateningly—like the sudden appearance of a trout—disappearing as quickly beneath the flow. Each conveys, with varying degrees of intensity, a diligence of emotional restraint that results from Nick’s effort of self-suppression: “I tried never to think about it,” says sleepless Nick in “Now I Lay Me” (CSS 276); “He was trying to hold it in,” the narrator of “A Way You’ll Never Be” reports (314); and about Nick in “Big Two-Hearted River” we learn:

"His mind was starting to work. He knew he could choke it because he was tired" (169). In each story Nick succeeds, by an effort of composition, in holding back the material that rises to fill his mind. Nick constructs streams, fields of hopping bait, and meticulous campsites; he composes in order to prevent decomposition—a going "all to pieces" that, as we shall see, was the fate of his father's possessions in his mother's fire ("Now I Lay Me," CSS 278).

Nick's effort entails a vital and meticulous process of invention: "I would think of a trout stream I had fished along when I was a boy and fish its whole length very carefully in my mind" ("Now I Lay Me," CSS 276). Merging the activities of fishing, remembering, and fiction-making, Nick places himself inside his own tale; about his sleepless endeavors he does not say "Sometimes I would *imagine fishing* four or five streams in the night," but rather, "Sometimes I *would fish* four or five streams in the night; starting as near as I could get to their source and fishing them down stream...." (277, italics mine).⁴ The territory of natural rivers and live fish converges first with the territory of imagined waters, and ultimately with memory and childhood. In Nick's practice of fiction/fishing, an upstream movement brings us not only to the river's natural origin and to the trout's seasonal spawning ground, but also to the earliest memory that Nick can summon to consciousness. The conflation of fishing and remembering in these passages suggests that when we arrive at these early scenes, we should understand them to be, in some sense, a spawning ground, a fountainhead:

I would fish the stream over again, starting where it emptied into the lake and fishing back up stream trying for all the trout I had missed coming down.

.....

I tried to remember everything that had ever happened to me, starting with just before the war and remembering back from one thing to another. I found I could only remember back to that attic in my grandfather's house. (277)

The materials of that originary attic space—"jars of snakes and other specimens that my father had collected as a boy"—find their way to his mother's first fire. "I remember those jars from the attic being thrown in the fire, and how they popped in the heat and fire flamed up from the alcohol. I remember snakes burning in the fire in the back yard." That Nick witnesses a

symbolic castration of his father by his mother has been suggested by multiple critics. The second fire is a result of his mother's cleaning out the basement of a new home and is told in the greater detail of an older boy's memory. Furthermore, the details of the second fire complicate the threat of the mother, the losses to the father, and the complicity of the boy.

One time when my father was away on a hunting trip she made a good thorough cleaning-out in the basement and burned everything that should not have been there. When my father came home and got down from his buggy and hitched the horse, the fire was still burning in the road beside the house. I went out to meet him. He handed me his shotgun and looked at the fire. 'What's this?' he asked.

'I've been cleaning out the basement, dear,' my mother said from the porch. She was standing there smiling, to meet him. My father looked at the fire and kicked at something. 'Get a rake, Nick,' he said to me. I went to the basement and brought a rake and my father raked very carefully in the ashes. He raked out stone axes and stone skinning knives and tools for making arrowheads and pieces of pottery and many arrowheads. They had all been blackened and chipped by the fire. My father raked them all out very carefully and spread them on the grass by the road.... 'The best arrowheads went all to pieces,' he said. (278)

As Paul Smith notes, in a surviving draft of this story Hemingway adds to the mother's greeting: "And Nicky's helped me burn the things" only, instead of writing "Nicky," Hemingway wrote "'and *Ernie's* helped me burn the things'" ("Typewriter" 88). We do not need evidence that the fire is an autobiographical incident (as the name suggests) in order to understand the boy's experience of complicity and powerlessness in the face of his mother's "cleaning out." Smith explores the probability that in the father's absence, the boy's mother (whether Mrs. Adams or Grace Hemingway) enlisted his help in the purge, making him an accomplice in the assault on his father ("Typewriter" 88). I would add that his father's question, "What's this?" directed to Nick as they both stand beside the fire, pulls the boy deeper into complicity by its implication that Nick knows what has been destroyed and

is accountable to answer the question. Nick's temporary adoption of his mother's point of view is indicated when the narrative, apparently without irony, describes the discarded contents of the basement as "everything that should not have been there." However, from the moment of his father's question, "What's this?" the son, as if assuming for the first time the father's point of view, grasps what "this" is, and silently shifts his attention to rescuing his father's belongings from the fire, identifying with what Richard Hovey aptly calls "symbols of masculine authority and prowess" (186); he obeys each of his father's commands: "Get a rake, Nick.... Take the gun and the bags in the house, Nick, and bring me a paper.... Take them one at a time.... Don't try and carry too much at once." Nick brings a newspaper from his father's study.

My father spread all the blackened, chipped stone implements on the paper and then wrapped them up. 'The best arrowheads went all to pieces,' he said. (278)

The newspaper brought by Nick allows his father to wrap in the printed word these artifacts of a primitive life—a life identified with his father (Adams's gun and ancient arrowheads lie on the grass together) and threatened by his mother. As the earlier manuscripts of the story demonstrate, Hemingway worked on this fire, adding material to the blaze in three successive versions. The first version of the fire includes axes, skinning knives, and arrowheads (JFK 618); the second removes nothing, but adds "tools for making arrowheads" (JFK 620); the third version includes "pieces of pottery" among the charred ingredients (JFK 621). Each element in the fire can be seen to suggest an aspect of the manhood here endangered; the added tools and pottery shards complicate the implied identity of weapon-user with weapon-maker and finally, artisan. Aspects of this fire appear again in descriptions of the battlefield near Fornaci ("A Way You'll Never Be") and the burned town of Seney ("Big Two-Hearted River") as if, in this primal scene, the son has received a charge from the father to collect and reconstruct the elements of his father's being, to keep them from "going all to pieces." What is at stake is the son's own inherited manhood, which he repeatedly wraps in the printed word to try to safeguard his identity.

As a boy, Nick learns to fear a falling to pieces—in his own yard—long before his war injury, and the narrator of "Now I Lay Me" still struggles, through the production of language, to keep body and soul intact. Thus,

linked to this early memory are the conscious activities of recollection or invention that rescue the young soldier of “Now I Lay Me” from his fears of materially enacting that fragmentation. The imaginary waters of his insomniac search offer more fish than have been apparent on the first pass, and repetition of the familiar is a comfort to this narrator, whether of trout in streams or words in text.

Nick’s patterns of fishing and remembering in “Now I Lay Me” constitute a consistent pursuit of his prey; but the narrative of “Big Two-Hearted River” suggests a more ambivalent approach that acknowledges the danger, as well as the promise, in lowering bait beneath the surface of the river, or beyond the limits of conscious memory, to pull the “big trout” from greater depths:

Just when the sun made the water blinding in the glare before it went down, you were liable to strike a big trout anywhere in the current. It was almost impossible to fish then, the surface of the water was blinding as a mirror in the sun. Of course, you could fish upstream, but in a stream like the Black or this, you had to wallow against the current and in a deep place, the water piled upon you. (CSS178)

That the blinding, impenetrably lighted surface disables the fisherman is clear; but what also may be suggested here is the capacity of the river to reflect the fisherman, to make him conscious of himself in its mirror. Wishing to avoid both blind fishing and the possibility of self-discovery, Nick’s alternative seems to be an equally troubling “wallowing”—upstream, and too deep for safety.

In his nocturnal story-making, Nick of “Now I Lay Me,” describes the confluence of real and invented rivers as, “being awake and dreaming” (CSS 277). That liminal state serves two of Nick’s aims: it assures the young soldier’s self-rescue, and it provides the writer with material for his stories from the deep pools of dreams.

Some nights, too, I made up streams, and some of them were very exciting, and it was like being awake and dreaming. Some of the streams I still remember and think that I have fished in them, and they are confused with streams I really know. I gave them all names and went to them on the train and sometimes walked for miles to get to them. (277)

If Nick can fish the abundant flow of images without losing consciousness, he can hold on to his soul while he wades in streams of potentially threatening memory that he “really know[s].” To keep himself awake in “Now I Lay Me,” Nick uses the very materials—everything and everyone he can remember—which might enter his dreams were he to let himself sleep. Nick, like Shakespeare’s Hamlet, confuses sleep with death and fears the “dreams” that lost consciousness may produce:

...To die, to sleep—

To sleep, perchance to dream—ay, there’s the rub,
for in that sleep of death what dreams may come.

(*Hamlet* iii.i.63–65)

Nick’s wakeful control signifies the writer’s fear of releasing his memories into the uncontrollable realm of dreams, what the young prince acknowledges to be “undiscovered country” (iii.i.78). If Nick does “shut [his] eyes and let [himself] go” his story will make *itself* up; he maintains consciousness in order to maintain control of his soul, that dangerous unconscious material of self that will “go off” if Nick relaxes in his “very great effort” to stop it.

Both the material of Nick’s soul and the rhetorical restraints designed to compose and contain that material are repeated in the third-person Nick Adams stories. As we have seen above, the imagined streams of “Now I Lay Me” are the fictional expeditions on which Hemingway sends Nick in tales like “Big Two-Hearted River.” Specific elements of Nick’s nocturnal fictions surface in his later “actual” trips. For example, the train ride and walk toward water that Nick “makes up” in the passage quoted above from “Now I Lay Me” (“I...went to them on the train and sometimes walked for miles to get to them”) Hemingway includes in the fishing trip of “Big Two-Hearted River,” where Nick does, indeed, take the train, and then walk for miles to get to the river:

He was tired and very hot...At any time he knew he could strike the river by turning off to his left. It could not be more than a mile away. But he kept on toward the north to hit the river as far upstream as he could go in one day’s walking. (CSS165)

In addition, Nick's nocturnal habits of listing and repetition—the litany of language produced in order to hold off death—parallel verbal patterns in other Hemingway stories, such as the repeated and measured naming of cities, foods, streets, restaurants, and cafés. Often, single words are repeated in an incantatory prose villanelle that produces a stillness in the action—the kind of stillness that might be comforting to Nick. In this passage from “Big Two-Hearted River,” for example, the words “water,” “stream,” “trout,” “insects,” “surface,” “rising,” and “jumped” are rhythmically repeated and passed from sentence to sentence.

Nick looked down the river at the trout rising. They were rising to insects come from the swamp on the other side of the stream when the sun went down. The trout jumped out of water to take them. While Nick walked through the little stretch of meadow alongside the stream, trout had jumped high out of the water. Now as he looked down the river, the insects must be settling on the surface, for the trout were feeding steadily all down the stream. As far down the long stretch as he could see, the trout were rising, making circles all down the surface of the water, as though it were starting to rain. (CSS166)

The language echoes, gathers, and hints at the mystery beneath the surface, holding the reader steady as a trout facing upstream in the current, awake and dreaming.

The repetitious and compulsive excess of language appears more urgently in “A Way You’ll Never Be,” as a still-recovering Nick describes the recently active battlefield to which he returns. For example, when Nick is faced with the bloated bodies of the dead, the narrative records first his attention to the scattered materials of the battle—“stick bombs, helmets, rifles, entrenching tools, ammunition boxes, star shell pistols...” — then to the papers that have tumbled from the pockets and packs of the men: prayer books, postcards, photographs and the “letters, letters, letters.” Nick notes, “There was always much paper about the dead and the debris of this attack was no exception” (CSS306–307). These personal and revealing items—violently scattered and exposed by death—make physical the exposure inherent in losing consciousness, of letting one’s soul “go out.” The scattered “texts” constitute evi-

dence of one's personal history, faith, and connections to loved ones; here is identity, memory and dream "gone all to pieces." Nick fashions catalogues of items in an attempt to gather and order the "debris" and the narrator confides to us later that, "That was why he noticed everything in such detail to keep it all straight so he would know just where he was;" (311). Perhaps Nick's compulsive lists are a grown boy's continuing attempt to answer the question asked by the father in that primal scene: "What's this?" Nick's present war wound triggers the symptoms of his earlier trauma. He finds in a burned Italian village what he found as a boy: the Italian front's ruined weapons and tools of survival, as well as its scattered texts—records of man's existence—mirror the smaller fragments of that early conflagration, in which fire reduced to litter the substance of one man's identity.

Another, perhaps more tenuous, link between the scenes of the early fire and the firefight near Fornaci is suggested by a striking image of the soul leaving the body that Hemingway penciled down the right margin of an early typescript of "Now I Lay Me," but omitted from subsequent versions, perhaps because this colorful analogy does not conform to the sparse, declarative style of Nick's confession. In the penciled addition, Nick describes the sensation of his soul going out of his body in this way: "The moment of starting to go was something like a red silk handkerchief being pulled out of your pocket if your pocket was your body" (JFK 620). When this death simile resurfaces in Nick's battlefield description, its locus is the image of spilled pockets, through which it suggests both the ordinariness and the fragility of our mortality.

They lay alone or in clumps in the high grass of the field
and along the road, their pockets out, and over them were
flies and around each body or group of bodies were the
scattered papers. (CSS 306)

After a two-paragraph catalogue of weapons, tools, and paper debris, the narrator returns to the pockets: "These were the new dead and no one had bothered with anything but their pockets.... Their coats were opened too and their pockets were out" (307). The picked pockets powerfully suggest a carelessly unchecked petty theft of humanity.

In all three of these tales, "Big Two-Hearted River," "Now I Lay Me," and "A Way You'll Never Be," the creatures around Nick—silkworms, bait (such as

grasshoppers or salamanders), and of course, trout—become anthropomorphised and included as participants in the realm of Nick's apprehension. At times, assuming the role of alter ego, they embody all the terror and vulnerability of the young man. For example, in "Big Two-Hearted River," Nick witnesses the movement of a submerged trout, a play of light and shadow that performs the fearful separation of soul from body about which he has confided in "Now I Lay Me." The soul strives upstream:

[A] big trout shot upstream in a long angle, then lost his shadow as he came through the surface of the water, caught the sun, and then, as he went back into the stream under the surface, his shadow seemed to float down the stream with the current, unresisting... ("Big Two-Hearted River," CSS163–164)

In "Now I Lay Me" salamanders become the vessels of Nick's anxiety; he confides his repulsion at using salamanders and crickets for bait—salamanders because their "tiny feet... tried to hold on to the hook" and crickets, "because of the way they acted about the hook." The subject of grasshoppers pulls an unstable "Nicolo" (so dubbed by the Italian commander of "A Way You'll Never Be") into a frenzied oration. Dressed in an American uniform to boost morale by suggesting the imminent arrival of American aid, Nick has bicycled to the front to encourage a battalion of Italian troops. But he is incapable of composing himself once he has viewed the carnage and litter of their recent battle, and, in a manic version of the prayerful Nick of "Now I Lay Me," he produces an uncontrolled narrative for his horrified listeners. In what becomes a gothic pep-talk, Nick conflates American-uniformed troops, like himself, with locusts: "[S]oon you will see untold millions wearing this uniform swarming like locusts. The grasshopper... is really a locust." Standing in his brown uniform, the only one of its kind on the front, Nick describes the worthiness of the "medium brown" as fish bait because of its ability to "last in the water," unlike more colorful varieties, whose wings "go to pieces in the water" ("A Way You'll Never Be," CSS312). Identifying himself with a creature that resists dissolution, Nicolo holds himself together, performing this disturbing version of that "very great effort" made by the soldier of the silkworm night, and reestablishing for the reader a link to the primal scene of dissolution, not in water, but in fire. In the military cliché

with which Nicolo concludes his rambling speech, we hear his struggle against that “going to pieces”: “Gentlemen, either you must govern or you must be governed” (313).

That same attention to detail and desire to compose (to “govern” oneself) structures the narrative of Nick on the fishing trip in Michigan in “Big Two-Hearted River.” In fact, this postwar story reads like a successful fabrication of the deliberate insomniac of “Now I Lay Me.” In “Big Two-Hearted River,” Nick’s fishing trip to Seney, Michigan represents an attempt to return to the familiar skills, pleasures, and physical challenges of an earlier time. Nick disembarks from the train in town and begins to walk north: “He knew where he wanted to strike the river . . . [H]e kept on toward the north to hit the river as far upstream as he could in one day’s walking” (CSS165).

However, before Nick begins his journey upstream, the narrator records elements of the landscape that resemble the traumatic scene of Nick’s childhood. Seney, like his father’s possessions, like the town viewed by “Nicolo” at the Italian front, has been burned. Nick’s first view of the Michigan village is of a razed past; the remembered landscape and architecture of earlier trips has been altered by a fire that is not explained in the story:

There was no town, nothing but the rails and the burned-over country. The thirteen saloons that had lined the one street of Seney had not left a trace. The foundations of the Mansion House hotel stuck up above the ground. The stone was *chipped and split by the fire*. It was all that was left of the town of Seney. Even the surface had been burned off the ground. (CSS163, emphasis mine)

When Nick attempts, physically or psychically, to revisit his past, he finds it “chipped and split by fire.” What the return to Seney represents is that the recovery of a time before things went all to pieces may be impossible; for we learned in “Now I Lay Me” that when Nick travels back to what he identifies as his earliest memory, he arrives at the attic and the fires; he finds that, for him, there is no time before the destruction and fragmentation.

The Nick of “Big Two-Hearted River” attempts to create an order where he suspects he will not find one, carrying a pack that is “much too heavy” (CSS 164), that makes his back ache and makes him lean into the hill as he walks; hauling the materials needed to make a good camp—to recreate a

home—Nick struggles upstream. In the primal scene of the fire, Nick's father has spoken only six brief sentences: one question, one statement, and four commands. One of these, issued when the boy lifts both gun and game bags to carry them to the house, has apparently been forgotten, or, is remembered and defied by the adult Nick: "Don't try and carry too much at once" ("Now I Lay Me," CSS 278). Nick's pack is swollen with the "details" of which he needs to keep track—the unbroken, unseparated pieces of his life. He methodically pulls each of more than thirty items from this equivalent of a clown car: three blankets; a tent, rope, and tent pole; cheesecloth, a paper sack of nails, tin plate, folding canvas bucket, and coffee pot; cans of pork and beans, spaghetti, apricots, grease, and condensed milk; a frying pan, wire grill, and bottle for grasshoppers; bread, ketchup, coffee, sugar, buckwheat flour, a jar of apple butter, and cigarettes; a knife, oiled paper, and an onion. He has defiantly carried "too much," bringing tools, food, and a home designed for one—with no attic or basement or parents: "Nothing could touch him. . . . He was in his home where he had made it" ("Big Two-Hearted River," CSS167).

The one unsafe element of Nick's "Big Two-Hearted River" fishing trip, a locus for the anxiety the soldier Nick expresses about his soul on the silk-worm night, is the swamp:

Nick did not want to go in there now. He felt a reaction against deep wading...in the fast deep water, in the half light, the fishing would be tragic. In the swamp fishing was a tragic adventure. Nick did not want it. (CSS198)

Particularly suggestive of Nick's efforts to avoid the tragedy of the swamp—to control this story—is the gutting of the two trout that Nick has caught. Sitting at the far side of the river on the edge of the swamp, Nick breaks the necks of the living trout on the log where he sits, then guts both trout. Disemboweling an animal might well be considered taking it "all to pieces," but when Hemingway watches Nick gut the trout, something quite different happens:

All the insides and the gills and tongue came out in one piece. They were both males; long gray-white strips of milt, smooth and clean. All the insides clean and compact, coming out all together. (180)

The male trout are relieved of their reproductive organs and tongues all in one “clean and compact” surgery. Things are not going to pieces in this male world; instead, with the fisherman’s precise skill, things “came out in one piece.” Emptied of their insides and rinsed in the water, the sexless, tongueless trout “looked like live fish” to Nick, “their color was not gone yet” (180).

It is the design of this trip that Nick gut himself, emptying himself of everything that identifies him as a man and a writer, while still performing his fishing rituals in a life-like manner. He has come on this trip to leave behind all that he can: “He felt that he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him” (CSS 179). The trout-gutting in “Big Two-Hearted River” makes clear the primal threat that Nick understood from witnessing those two early fires. Nick of “Now I Lay Me” explicitly remembers his childhood, but is unable to interpret it, while Nick of “Big Two-Hearted River” enacts an idealized, ritualistic fishing trip, through whose meticulous performance he seeks to reconstruct a “safe” home, and to anesthetize and symbolically neuter himself to escape injuries threatened, not on the battlefield, but in the backyard.

notes

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1. In his essay, “‘Now I Lay Me’: Nick’s Strange Monologue Hemingway’s Powerful Lyric, and the Reader’s Disconcerting Experience,” which concerns, in part, the reader’s relationship to “Nick the teller,” Phelan cogently links Nick’s early psychic trauma and his war wound, asserting that the story creates an “analogy between mortar shells and wives” (64).
2. Paul Smith notes the first-person versions of both of these stories in *A Reader’s Guide to the Short Stories* 85, 270.
3. Versions of “Now I Lay Me” can be found in manuscript and typescript in Folders 618–621 of the Hemingway Collection in the John F. Kennedy Library, Boston.
4. Phelan provides a more complete analysis of the significance of the shift in tenses and pronouns (51–55).
4. Focusing on Nick, the still-anxious narrator of “Now I Lay Me,” Phelan has made a similar point that “what troubles him are the continuing effects of his psychic wounds” (59).

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